

TOO SMALL TO IGNORE

Why Children Are
the Next **Big Thing**

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WITH DEAN MERRILL

Foreword by Michael W. Smith



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P R E S S

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To respect the privacy of the author's boyhood friends in Africa, the names "Alezye," "Alezana," "Alebeh," "Kolzana," and "Padubeh" are pseudonyms. Also, the names of the mission boarding school and its various staff members have been changed. However, all events and other descriptions are factual to the best of the author's recollection.

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FOREWORD

My life isn't defined by my music. Music is my vocation. My life is characterized by my relationship with God and my family—my beautiful wife, Debbie, and our five great kids.

My friend and brother in Christ, Dr. Wess Stafford, is a kindred soul. Since 1993, about as long as I've known him, Wess has served as the president and CEO of Compassion International. But this tender-hearted, deeply compassionate man isn't defined by his vocation either.

Like me, Wess wants to be known as a God-fearing man who loves his wife and kids. I believe his dear wife, Donna, and two daughters, Jenny and Katie, would say Wess's greatest priority and most profound accomplishment are being a godly husband and father.

In *Too Small to Ignore*, Wess builds a strong, passionate, and reasoned case for the cause of God's children. He admonishes us, Christ's body, about committing sins of omission and shirking our responsibilities to defend the children—the most vulnerable among us. And he challenges us to change our ways. Wess's message is as simple as it is profound.

Children, the smallest, weakest members of our human family, often pay the greatest price for our fallen world's sins. Yet they are the lowest priority among big institutions in our world. We must begin today giving our children the time, attention, respect, and commitment they deserve and our God requires.

I believe Wess shares our heavenly Father's broken heart; he grieves over the sins and abuses visited upon the little ones of this world. He reminds us that Jesus saved his harshest words of warning for adults to protect little ones, since he knew this world would wage abuses against them if they are not treasured, nurtured, and respected.

In more than twenty-five years of ministering to children across the world, Wess has come to what I believe is an explosive revelation: the reason children are such a low priority to the great institutions of this world is that there is an invisible battle going on—a spiritual war that rages over each and every child.

And the reason for this raging battle is clear. Research indicates that the vast majority of people who become Christians do so while still children, usually before the age of fourteen. If a person hasn't accepted Christ as a youth, studies tell us that the probability he or she will ever know Jesus is only six percent.

Children deserve to know that they are valued, that they matter, and *most important*, that they matter to Jesus!

Clearly though, it is children in poverty, "the least of these" among us, who have captured Wess's heart. And for good reason. The son of missionary parents, Wess grew up in a remote, destitute West African village, which helped him develop a deep respect and love for the poor and their children.

Like Wess, I'm firmly convinced that we have a profound obligation to care for the poor and their children. Our mutual conviction is founded in more than two thousand Bible passages that declare our heavenly Father's love for the impoverished and urge his followers, you and me, to defend their cause.

I also agree that the magnitude of the problem of poverty can easily lead us to despair. We believers often do nothing for one reason: we don't know what to do.

In 1994, Compassion asked me to become a spokesperson for its ministry. At that time, I simply wanted to sponsor a child and observe the work of the organization. So that's what I did.

I'd maintained for years that kids, no matter where they live, have some basic similarities—they play the same, they interact the same, and their desire for approval and love is the same. But their similarities end when absolute poverty is added to the situation. When I visited Compassion's work in Ecuador, it was the first time I'd come face to face with poverty's reality. And it was overwhelming.

I couldn't process all the sights, sounds, and smells I was experiencing. I had gone from holding my own kids, safe and healthy in our home, to holding a baby overseas who was probably not going to live much longer.

Then as I met my sponsored child, Gavi, visited several Compassion projects, and saw the quality of the work, it solidified everything for me. I sensed the spirit of joy in the kids who attended the projects, despite the

surrounding poverty. These kids didn't have anything, and they leaned on the Lord for everything. But they were happy.

After my trip to Ecuador, I decided to become a spokesperson for Compassion. And because it's a God thing, I love sharing about the ministry and the children it serves. My family and I have since sponsored three other precious children through Compassion's ministry. What an incredible experience. Each child has touched our lives deeply.

Unlike my profession, which puts me in the spotlight most of the year, kids are rarely in the spotlight. But it's time they were. And because of Wess Stafford and this powerful book, they are. Reading this book will change your heart and help you understand God's position for children in his kingdom.

Too Small to Ignore is definitely a God thing.

—MICHAEL W. SMITH

Introduction

THE GREAT OMISSION

Late one evening D. L. Moody, the premier American evangelist of the 1800s, arrived home from speaking at a meeting. Emma, his wife, was already asleep. As her exhausted husband climbed into bed, she rolled over and murmured, “So how did it go tonight?”

“Pretty well,” he replied. “Two and a half converts.”

His wife lay silently for a moment pondering this response, then finally smiled. “That’s sweet,” she replied. “How old was the child?”

“No, no, no,” Moody answered. “It was two children and one adult! The children have their whole lives in front of them. The adult’s life is already half-gone.”



I have to ask you, what mental image came to your mind when you read “two and a half converts” just now? Did you picture what Emma Moody pictured: two grownups standing at the front of an auditorium with a little child beside them? Be honest.

If you did, don’t feel badly—you’re in the overwhelming majority. In fact, I’ll be honest too. I had worked with Compassion International, a child-focused organization, for ten years when I first heard that story, and even I sat there imagining two adults and one child.

I don’t anymore...and that is what this book is all about.

If I say to you, “Fold your arms,” you will most naturally place your right hand on your left biceps and tuck your left hand inside the crook of your right elbow. This feels natural to you. Of course, you could place your

left hand on your right biceps, but it would feel very strange. (Try it; you'll see what I mean.)

To change your natural pattern is a good example of what is called a "paradigm shift." The term means a new and off-stride view of reality—just like D. L. Moody's unique perspective on his world of listeners. He heard the beat of a distant drummer and marched to that cadence. He was clearly out of step with his contemporaries. He would still be out of step with the perspectives, priorities, and practices of today's world, both secular and Christian.

No matter what the setting, children seem to be a second-rate mandate. No matter what the ill of society, it tends to spiral downward and eventually land with its cruelest and most smothering impact on our littlest citizens. Small, weak, helpless, innocent, vulnerable, and trusting, they are the waiting victims for our simple neglect and most evil abuse. No matter what goes wrong, the little ones pay the greatest price.

When hunger and famine strike a nation, adults become weak and hungry, but it is the children who most often starve to death. When disease arrives with all its fury, adults can become very sick, but the first to die are usually the children. When war erupts over ethnicity or boundary lines in the dust, it is the littlest victims who pay the most tragic price. The wars of the last decade killed more children than soldiers.¹ Far more children were injured or permanently maimed by our battles. The tragedies go on for years after the last gunshot or grenade blast, as land mines and booby-trapped toys keep wounding, terrorizing, and killing our innocent ones.

The ritual sacrifice of children has been taboo for thousands of years. Yet tragically it is practiced every day across our world. We sacrifice children on the altars of our most destructive sins. When the sickness of pornography has run to its most evil and destructive end, it takes the form of child pornography. When prostitution reaches its sickest, most depraved form, it becomes child prostitution.

Perhaps a little closer to home is the reality that children are the sacrificial lambs when our homes break up through neglect, anger, hostility, and eventually divorce. Kids frequently blame themselves for the destruction, carrying deep scars on their innocent spirits for a lifetime.

Our most vulnerable citizens have become the world's most disposable commodity. So vulnerable are children to the ravages of poverty that malnutrition causes more than 55 percent of the child deaths in our world.² This is all the more tragic when we are told that the earth can produce enough food for every man, woman, and child to have 2,720 calories per day—more than any of us need.³ So while God has done his part in creating a world capable of providing what we need, we have not done our part in the stewardship of it, in seeing that it gets to the end of the line, to the poorest and neediest—the children.

Statistics as appalling as these can overwhelm us. We become paralyzed by the sheer magnitude of the problem. It's a bit like looking at children from the wrong end of a telescope. They appear vague and otherworldly. But do you remember the shock and heartache you felt when you watched the World Trade Center towers crumble to the streets of New York, taking nearly three thousand innocent lives with them? It was one of those historic moments that will live in infamy. We will all be able to tell our grandchildren exactly where we were when that tragedy of tragedies occurred. The whole world staggered to a halt that day. Nothing else seemed to matter.

Now imagine with me for a moment. What if a catastrophe of equal devastation had happened at noon, just three hours later, at the Sears Tower in Chicago? Suddenly the people behind the microphones and lenses would have scrambled to cover this new disaster. And what if in the midst of their gathering that Chicago story, reports had come in, saying that three thousand *more* innocent people had died in a nightmarish attack on Denver? Wouldn't that have brought all else to a stop? Wouldn't our national and world leaders have declared that nothing else mattered on the planet until we brought an end to this carnage? Enough is enough!

But if, as the world kept turning that dark September 11, the same level of human loss had continued to occur every three hours—Los Angeles...then Honolulu...Tokyo...Bangkok...Calcutta...Moscow...finally London—the world would have shuddered to a grinding halt, never to be the same again.

Well, something similar did happen on a worldwide scale that tragic day. *Thirty thousand of our little innocents under age five were taken from us.*⁴

Sadly, this level of loss also happened on September 10 and again on September 12 and every single day since. The microphones, cameras, and satellite dishes don't bring this shocking reality into our living rooms as they did on 9/11. But it happens nonetheless. Without power or voice, these little children keep silently slipping away into the arms of their grieving heavenly Father, lost from a world that is unworthy of them, a world that has lost its heart.



Because children have no political clout or even voice in global affairs, they can become marginalized. Since they don't vote, they have little effect on the political powers that should act on their behalf. Every segment of society seems to have figured out how to protest, march, and agitate for its individual and collective rights. But have you ever seen children holding a protest? Ever seen their placards going down your city streets? I thought not.

They have much to legitimately protest, but they are voiceless and powerless. Our selfishness and greed cause them to pay the greatest price, but they suffer silently.

In all my world travels, I have never come across a Children's Hall of Fame to honor the champions and heroes of the young. It should come as no great surprise that very little gets handed down on their behalf by the powers that be.

But is it really true that children have nothing to offer? Ask any mom or dad who puts little ones to bed at night. Ask any teacher who gets a Valentine's Day card made with construction paper, glitter, and way too much glue.

Children may not have much to give materially, but they generously give all they have to those they love and believe in: hugs at bedtime that require both arms and legs; full-body squeezes amid giggles and laughter that are beyond value; a storm of sloppy kisses on your cheek; a squeeze of your hand that confides, *I'm afraid, but I trust you*; pudgy little fingers folded in simple, sincere prayer that rises up like perfume to the very heart of God. These things are priceless and more than enough.

Few gifts on earth are as wondrous as the love of a child. Advocates for children know deep in their hearts the truth of the saying “You never stand so tall as when you stoop to help a child.”



Sadly, the church cannot claim exemption from the neglect and abuse of children. The church may have avoided overt sins of commission (tragically, not always), but we are equally guilty of the covert sins of omission. I have rarely attended a major church or mission conference that focused on children. Have you?

Several years ago I attended an international conference for sharing vision, strategies, programs, and priorities to bring the world to Christ by the year 2000. I was not one of the scheduled speakers; those slots were reserved for a very select group of mission and denominational heads. Each was given just fifteen minutes on the platform to share the most essential priorities in which they were engaged. So precious was the time of this three-day conference that a bell was actually rung when time was up, to keep things moving.

I went enthusiastically, notebook in hand, to glean from the very best what all of us could do in this great effort to reach the world for Christ. What strategic role could my child-focused organization play in this exciting movement? I sat there, pen poised, as the first few speakers made their case for what they were doing and why.

By the third speaker, I realized I had written nothing down. Not one Christian leader had said anything about children and how to evangelize them in this final hour of human history. I began to keep a tally of how many times I actually heard speakers mention “child” or “children” in their strategic presentations. As the hours passed, I became more and more discouraged. Children were not on the minds of any of these great leaders.

By the end of the conference, I had heard the words “child” or “children” only twelve times—and never in the context of a specific strategy to reach them. They were instead lumped into the broader group of “every man, woman, and child.” I was filled with despair and bursting to speak

up for the children—those who cannot speak for themselves. The printed program said that in the final session there would be open microphones for “additional questions or comments.” I could hardly wait for the chance to make a speech about this great omission from the Great Commission.

To my dismay, the conference had gotten behind schedule (despite the ringing bell), and that final session had to be cancelled. What I had hoped to say, if given a chance that final day, was this:

People, humor me for just a brief moment. All of you close your eyes and picture this great harvest of humanity you have been talking about so passionately. What does that vast sea of people actually look like? You have spoken eloquently about the needs of “the 10/40 Window.” Who are these individuals who stretch across Asia and Africa, knowing nothing of Christ’s atoning work and needing to hear the message of salvation? If, in your mental image of that vast sea of humanity every other person is not a child, you don’t know what the harvest looks like!

Fully half of the world, and especially the developing world, are children and teenagers. Yet they were not even a miniscule part of the conference strategies. Believe me, D. L. Moody would have gone ballistic about this.

What portion of your church budget is dedicated to children’s ministry? If it is more than 15 percent, yours is an exceptional church. What portion of your denomination’s mission budget is spent on worldwide children’s ministry? Again, if it is more than 10 percent, that is very rare.

Have you ever heard a major radio or television program or even a single broadcast advocating children’s ministry? Ever seen an edition of your favorite Christian magazine focused exclusively on children? Who are the hardest volunteers to recruit in your local church? Often it’s the nursery workers and children’s Sunday school teachers.

Can you name a single evangelical leader who is known as an outspoken champion for children, a D. L. Moody of today? I can’t. No, the church simply cannot wash its hands of the great omission.

What makes all this so urgent is that missiological research indicates that almost two-thirds of the people who give their lives to Christ do so before the age of eighteen.⁵ In other words, line up any twenty Christians, and thirteen of them will have accepted Christ as their Savior while a child or youth. In fact, researchers tell us that if people have not accepted Christ by age twenty-one, the probability that they ever will is only 23 percent. Yet we spend a pittance on the more open and strategic part of the harvest.

Every major movement in world history has recognized the strategic importance of mobilizing children. The Nazis had their Hitler Youth bands. The Chinese Communists had their Red Guards. The Taliban in Afghanistan had their madrasah schools to instill extremism in the young. The great omission seems to be unique to Christians.

One of the first things children are taught their first day of school is how to stand in line. Eager to please, they become good at it. The tragedy is that all too often they find themselves at the end of society's line. And that is where they stay, while others with more size, influence, and resources jump in front of them. Most of us can remember the class bully who would push us aside with a sneer because we could do nothing to stop him. That is what happens to children in today's world all the time. Something has to be done on their behalf!



We cannot claim that the Scriptures are unclear on how precious children are to God Almighty. He not only loves them with a love we cannot begin to understand, but he respects and believes in them. The Bible tells more than a few stories in which God had such an important task to be done that he simply could not entrust it to an adult. Only a child would do! Jesus uttered a powerful and terrifying warning to protect little ones from the kind of stumbling and abuse that humanity can impose upon them if they are not treasured, nurtured, and respected enough. His disciples never got a more enraged tongue-lashing than when they tried to keep children away from the Master.

Neither can we say that today's societies and cultures do not innately

love their children. Nowhere do mothers fail to mourn the loss of a child or to sacrifice all they have in time, effort, and resources on their children's behalf. What parent has not experienced that amazing flood of love that finds its way into your heart as you hold your newborn child? You are captivated by love in just moments.

Then what is the problem? I have spent more than twenty-eight years ministering to children across the world. Some of them suffer in great poverty, while others are smothered in the lap of luxury. Deep down, I have come to the conclusion that the reason they are such a low priority to the great human institutions that seek to control this world, both secular and Christian, is that an invisible battle, a spiritual war, rages over each and every child. It is above us and beyond us and engages the full fury of the hosts of both heaven and hell. Children may be ignored by government, church, and mission—but not by Satan or God Almighty.

First, we must understand that Satan knows the heart of God. It is Satan's greatest joy and highest priority to do all in his power to break the heart of *Elohim*, the creator of heaven and earth. Remember that, as Lucifer, Satan was a witness to the process of creating the world. I can imagine heaven's one-time chief angel watching with great interest as the Spirit of God hovered over a dark and formless world. He saw the dazzling advent of light. He watched amazed at the creation of land and sea, plants and animals—all the creative work of Jehovah. It frustrated and angered him to see the great joy and satisfaction God was getting from the emergence of this wondrous work of his hands.

Ever watchful for an avenue of attack, Satan found it in the moment God fashioned a man in his own image from the dust of the earth and then breathed his own breath into the man's nostrils. Something about this crowning part of the Creation moved God deeply with a profound love. Satan saw it and knew he had found an inroad. All he had to do was attack and hopefully destroy mankind. He began his strategy as a serpent in the Garden of Eden, and he has been doing it ever since.

At the moment of birth, all heaven stands in breathless anticipation and breaks into shouts of joy and praise. Each child is born into the world loved and full of potential to bring joy to the heart of God. A little flame

flickers deep in the child's being. It reflects a dignity and worth, made in the image of God Almighty.

Meanwhile Satan and his evil hosts stand ready to pounce and destroy that life as quickly and completely as possible, knowing how that will break the heart of God. All of heaven and hell are present and focused on the newborn life—for vastly different reasons. Both have strategic designs for this little one.

Given this frightening warfare between heaven and hell, it is all the more ironic that children are seemingly so unimportant to us adults. While all of heaven stands and cheers whenever a little one is born, and all of hell hurls itself at its destruction, we glibly go about our lives and ministries oblivious of the raging battle or the strategic importance of the children around us day by day. What is to be done?



It begins now, here, and with you! It begins with the very next child God brings across your path. Every child you encounter is a divine appointment. With each one you have the power and opportunity to build the child up or tear the child down.

A life can be launched with as little as a single phrase, an uplifting word, or an act of kindness. The spirit of a little child is a lot like wet cement. When a child is young, it takes little effort to make an impression that can last a lifetime.

If you are a positive, productive member of society, I'm willing to bet you owe that to someone long ago. Take a moment to reflect on your childhood. Who believed in you before you believed in yourself? Was it your mom or dad? Was it a teacher? Your Little League coach? Your grandmother?

Who said, "My, but that's a beautiful picture you drew," and now you make your living as an artist?

Who said, "You have a beautiful voice; I loved your song," and now you sing for a living or get great joy from singing for others?

Who said, "You were the best Joseph in the Christmas play I've ever seen. I thought you were really him!" and now you make your living as an actor?

The source of my sense of worth was my parents and the people of a little African village in northern Ivory Coast. Though poverty-stricken in many ways, these tender people took me in as one of their sons and nurtured me when the cement of my soul was wet. I'll tell you throughout this book about growing up in that village. There, daily, this adage was lived out: "It takes a village to raise a child."

Sadly, the opposite is also true. All it takes is a single unkind word, an isolated act of cruelty or abuse to destroy a life! Again, Satan knows this all too well. As I have shared these thoughts with people over the years, I have often seen their eyes well up with tears. They can remember exactly who almost destroyed them as a child.

Tragically, it is usually easier to name this destructive person than someone who impacted your life positively. Someone somewhere looked at you and said you were ugly. Someone said you were stupid, clumsy, worthless, or naughty—and the words made an impression on your soul with which you still struggle.

You probably have done one of two things with the hurt in your spirit. You have either accepted it as true, allowing it to define you, and resigned yourself to expect less than the best for your life. Or you have made it your life's crusade to prove them wrong. You have become a superachiever, driven, competitive, although perhaps deeply unhappy in the process. It all sprang from that one person's act of cruelty. If you are such a person, some of the most profound questions you can ever ask yourself are "What am I trying to prove? to whom? Why?" This mental process may help you know the truth—and perhaps set you free.

Believe me, nothing thwarts the efforts of Satan to destroy little lives more than a caring adult's timely intervention to build up their self-worth and assurance of being loved. The path of destruction can end with you. You can decide, as I have, that you will be an instrument of grace in the hands of God. Every child who crosses my path in the grocery line, at church, or at the ballpark I consider a divine appointment, an opportunity to lift that child up—even for a brief moment. It may just be the moment that will launch a life or restore one that needs kindness today.

You won't know until eternity, but your single act of kindness might not only change the little life standing before you; it might resonate for generations. A dear friend of mine named Danny Cook knew from family tradition that his ancestors came to America on the *Mayflower* as part of that courageous band of Pilgrims in 1620. Today, nearly four centuries later, his family includes a number of dedicated ministers of the gospel.

One time Danny decided to research his family tree to discover what had been accomplished. He was expecting a glorious path of outstanding men and women that led right to his doorstep. But as he followed the trail into the seventeenth hundreds and eighteen hundreds, the downward spiral shocked him. He discovered criminals, suicides, imprisonments, and even insanity. He began to wonder how on earth this family had ever returned to its God-fearing roots.

Then Danny came across the life of his great-grandmother. He learned from her obituary that, despite her conditions, she had accepted Christ as her Savior at the tender age of eight. She became known for her love of Jesus and for singing hymns wherever she went. She was a woman of earnest prayer and brought up her children to love the Lord. From that point onward, the story of the generations changed. That one woman's life of faith and joy a century ago changed the entire course of the Cook family, right up to the present time.

I wonder who led that little girl to Christ? The person who knelt with a child so long ago had no idea that this would be a pivotal moment in the life of an entire family. The dark decline would be reversed through that simple prayer.

Your small pebble in the pond of one child's life may send out ripples that eventually transform many others. I'm convinced that heaven will be full of such delightful surprises for those who were quietly faithful and sensitive.

If God places a child before you, and you are too busy to be either a positive or negative influence...you just did the latter! You communicated that the child doesn't matter and isn't important.

I have never met anyone who truly believes in children who does not

have a powerful story behind that perspective. I am no exception. In the chapters that follow, I will tell you the story of my childhood, of growing up in a remote, poverty-stricken African village, of surviving the boarding-school nightmare, of managing the shock and challenge of returning as a teenager to a very different place called America...and of ultimately taking up a life as a champion for children.

PART
ONE

NOT SOMEDAY... TODAY

Childhood—we get only one pass at it, and yet it dictates the quality of the rest of our lives. What we think, feel, experience, and endure in this earliest phase is the single most important indicator of what the rest of life is going to be like.

Yet as we mature, our first few years almost totally fade from our memory. Like the adults in the Peter Pan stories, we find that adulthood seems to expunge all traces of memory of what it was like to be a young child. Life recycles itself completely with each succeeding generation. When the delivery room nurse places that little bundle of joy into our arms that first magical minute, it seems we have to learn anew what childhood is about. Why do babies cry? What makes them learn the liberating joy of crawling? Why do they fight so desperately not to give in and go to sleep? So little we know. So much we have forgotten.

Too many of us tend to treat childhood as a preamble to actual life, a vulnerable period of time merely to be survived in order to get on with the real business of being a valid, contributing member of the human family. This is the mind-set that causes us to speak of children as “tomorrow’s world” or “the church’s future.” As noble as those phrases sound, they are all about pushing off the value of children to the Realm of Someday. Someday they will add value. Someday they will make a difference. Not today.

Our excuse, perhaps, is that no creature in the animal kingdom begins life more vulnerable and more in need of constant protection and nurture than the newborn member of *Homo sapiens*. Within an hour of birth, the baby antelope can dart about and outrun all but the swiftest of its predators. Even during those first dangerous sixty minutes, the fawn’s perfect camouflage and virtual lack of odor protect it. Thereafter, the antelope can manage.

A new hatchling crocodile fresh from the egg has all the features of its fearsome parents as well as all the instincts and life skills needed to find its way to the marsh and immediately begin a lifelong hunt for prey. Most birds within a month of hatching in the nest are full feathered and have taken wing. Babies of predators such as the lion, cheetah, or hyena had better be completely on their own within a year, before mom gives birth to the next generation, and they suddenly find themselves alienated, attacked, and driven away. They have to grow up fast!

But not so the human child. The creature destined to be the smartest, most cunning of all the animals is a helpless infant at birth. The child passes through several long years of vulnerability, needing absolutely everything. Food, protection, hygiene, sanitation, warmth, and shelter must be provided. What was God thinking? Even baby monkeys have the strength and survival instinct to cling tenaciously to their mother's fur as she runs, jumps, and swings from branch to branch high above the jungle floor. I never once saw a little monkey fall off its mother's back.

While children are born in the same condition all over the world, I have always been intrigued with how every society holds strongly to its own perception of childhood. Each frames different answers to such questions as, What is a child? How long is childhood? What roles do children play at different ages?

As already mentioned, my own childhood placed me in two of the most radically opposite societies on earth. At one end of the spectrum was the remote, little village in Ivory Coast, West Africa, where life was simple, primitive, unchanged for centuries, just a step removed from the Stone Age. But with just a few days' travel, I was suddenly uprooted and transplanted to the other extreme of human society—the fast-paced, ultramodern Western world. Not just anywhere in that world, but its epicenter of frenzy, materialism, and competition: New York City!

I'm not looking for sympathy, mind you. I learned a great deal from both extremes. In fact, let me invite you to journey back with me to my first hours as a teenager in the "land of the free and the home of the brave." It was a hot, humid midsummer day...

COKE BOTTLES AND TEDDY BEARS

“Hey, kid, whaddya say?” With a grandiose gesture, the greasy little Coney Island barker with the droop-down mustache presented his carnival stand. His beady lizard eyes glared out from behind wire-rim glasses.

I understood every word of his question but didn’t have a clue what he meant. In the village where I had grown up with my missionary parents and older sister, the word *kid* most often referred to a baby goat. And “What do I say?” I was mystified. In this country, so far from what I had assumed was the center of the earth, were kids each assigned something to say? Was this some kind of branding to keep track of so many children in this vast city they called New York?

“I don’t know what I say,” I finally stammered, embarrassed.

This man was only the second American I had met since disembarking the day before from the SS *Rotterdam*. His gruffness reminded me of the first American, a Manhattan taxi driver. In a fifteen-minute ride, he had assaulted everything I held dear—lessons learned around the campfire in the evenings from the wise village chief and his elders, not to mention my parents. As we careened through crowded streets lined with skyscrapers, the driver’s frustrations with life cut deeply into the tender spirit of America’s newest fourteen-year-old. His horn didn’t honk in friendly greeting, and as I later learned, that wasn’t a warm salute he gave with his left hand out the window. The traffic light changing from green to red brought a flurry of what I thought was English, but they were words I had certainly never picked up from the missionary community. My instincts told me to tread lightly here. There was much about this place I didn’t understand.

Now on the Coney Island midway I was still moving with caution. The obnoxious man snapped, “Don’t know what ya say? Yo, stupido, ya want one o’ these colossal teddy bears or not? All ya gotta do is break the bottles. It’s easy!”

I looked him over, as if sizing up prey in the jungle. Was he dangerous? He wore a cocked beret just like the French officials whose convoys occasionally stormed into our dusty village in their Land Rovers, barking orders

and demanding answers to perplexing questions. I didn't like this barker, didn't understand him, and didn't trust his shifty eyes and raspy voice. I backed away as I would have from a showdown with a panther.

At a safe distance I began studying the gaudy carnival stand. It was painted in loud, clashing colors. Behind the counter, about fifteen feet back, were three rickety shelves lined with Coke bottles. On the ground were glass shards that crunched as the man swaggered back and forth, harassing all who passed by. On the front railing lay half a dozen slingshots and a large jar of colorful marbles.

I did a double take, my eyes riveting on the slingshots. Finally! In this noisy, glitzy, crowded city, here was something familiar. Since I was six years old, a slingshot had hung every night from the post of my cot. It was the first thing I picked up every morning, draping it around my neck. To the boys in my village, slingshots were not just toys; they were homemade weapons, status symbols, and, yes, clothing. I smiled as I remembered that for some of my poverty-stricken African buddies, their slingshots around their necks were *all* they wore.

"Three shots! Twenty-five cents! Step right up!" The barker's staccato eruptions snapped me back to the reality of New York. Flashing between these radically different worlds would become a way of life for me in the months to come. Such sudden transitions would often leave me speechless as I tried to determine which of my four languages to use. Dyoula? Senari? French? No, it had to be English, which was my weakest.

High on both sides of the carnival stand were the most beautiful teddy bears I'd ever seen. I had read Winnie-the-Pooh books in Africa at noon rest, and these were just as I envisioned Pooh Bear to be. They were huge and impressive, like full-grown male baboons. The man may have been repugnant, but he clearly knew what he had: the biggest and best prizes on the midway.

A group of boys about my age came by and got the full treatment from my tormentor. They eyed the huge prizes, fingered the slingshots awkwardly, and huddled near the counter. They pointed at the prizes, punched each other in the arm, and speculated about whether to take the chance.

Finally one little guy was pushed to the front and hesitantly plunked

down his quarter. The second he picked up the slingshot, I could tell he didn't have a clue what he was doing. As he gripped the handle in his left hand, I could see his nervousness. With contorted face and squinting eyes, he pinched the leather pouch with his right hand and shakily pulled the rubber bands back.

I cringed, not sure if the next action would be the marble flying or the slingshot crotch planted firmly in his nostrils. Luckily, he let go of the proper end first. The marble limped forward pitifully, thudding softly against the canvas backdrop. The next two marbles were equally futile. Amid laughter and insults, the boy retreated into the group. I smiled.

Another boy tried, then a third. The booth man taunted them mercilessly. "Three lousy bottles. What's so hard about that? Come on, ain't any of ya man enough?" I thought of that same taunt from the giant Goliath just before his downfall. The boys shook their heads. With shoulders slumped, they slunk away. This was not only not fun; it obviously couldn't be done.

With the crowd gone, my camouflage disappeared, and there I stood once again, exposed. Just me and this pint-sized Goliath with the big mouth and the big prizes.

"Hey, you! Skinny kid! What ya scared of? C'mon, give it a try!" I could take all of his insults except for the insinuation that I was scared. In my village that dare would provoke any of us young warriors to do absolutely anything.

I approached him and pointed to the prizes overhead. "What do I have to do?"

"You take this slingshot and three marbles out of the jar. You shoot; you break three bottles; you win the prize!"

Now who is the stupido? I thought. Back in my village every kid was a slingshot virtuoso. We prided ourselves on driving baboons out of the cornfields, herding cattle, killing poisonous snakes, and shooting the eye out of any lizard foolish enough to poke its head over a mud wall—all with stones aimed with surgical precision. I wasn't up to the skill level of my African friends, but I could pretty much hold my own.

As I surveyed the booth's challenge, I thought, *What's the problem?*

There must be a trick to make this hard. The bottles are no more than fifteen feet away. They aren't even swinging on a rope or anything—they're stationary! Maybe they're unbreakable.

But then why all the glass on the ground? This is simple.

On our ocean crossing I had practiced recognizing American coins. I now pulled a quarter out of my pocket. I remembered when coins and paper money had come to our village to take the place of cowrie shells. We weren't sure the new currency could be trusted. How could anything be valuable if you could burn it or melt it?

Surrounded by the cacophony of the amusement park, I picked up the slingshot. It felt comfortable and familiar in my hand, like a long-lost friend.

"Do I have to hold it like the other guys did?" I asked. Maybe that was the catch.

"Naw, hold it any way ya want, kid. Just pull it back and break the bottle. Is that too hard?"

I began wrapping my left thumb and forefinger around the two prongs of the slingshot, burying the handle deep into my palm the way I knew would guarantee steadiness. Engulfed, the slingshot was an extension of my arm.

The man snickered. "Never seen anybody hold it like that before. If ya hurt yourself, I'm not responsible!"

I picked a shiny marble out of the jar. This was going to be even easier than I thought. Unlike the irregular stones we had to use in the village that required an extra calculation before firing, these totally smooth and perfectly spherical marbles were guaranteed to fly straight and true.

I raised the slingshot, pulled back the rubber, and with one flashing flick of my wrist, *splink!* went a bottle on the far end. A shower of glass exploded in all directions. The man stared at me while brushing bits of glass from his hair and clothing.

"Whoa, beginner's luck, huh?" he growled hopefully.

"Well, maybe not," I replied as I picked up another marble. *Blam!* Down went the second bottle. A crowd was beginning to grow behind me.

"I'm guessin' you've done this before, kid," the man hissed.

“Well, yeah, we do this where I come from,” I answered. With that, I picked up my third marble and pulverized the third bottle. The crowd cheered. Little Goliath winced.

Success—my first in America! My village buddies would have doubled over with laughter at my having won such a huge victory with so little challenge.

“Okay, I’ll have that big brown bear with the black nose, way up there!” I said, pointing.

“Not so fast, not so fast!” the barker sneered. “That’s not how it works. I said you’d win *a* prize, not the *grand* prize.” With a sarcastic flare, he pulled from under the counter a fuzzy little bear about four inches tall.

I felt foolish. He had conned me after all. “Well,” I stammered, “what do I have to do to win the grand prize?”

“Oh, you’ve got to work up to that. Another quarter, three more marbles. This goes in stages, don’t ya know that, kid? Where ya from?”

Fine. I had seen this kind of trickery among the Dyoula craftsmen from the village down the road. I plunked down another quarter. *Pow, pow, pow*. Three more Coke bottles shattered.

“Okay, now I want that big one,” I announced with a slight edge in my voice.

The man threw back his head and guffawed. “Well done, hotshot. Now ya get *this* one.” He pulled out a ten-inch bear. But when I disgustingly plunged my hand into my pocket to fish for another quarter, he paused.

“Wait just a darned minute. You’re gonna keep on bustin’ all my bottles, ain’t ya, kid?”

I nodded, glaring at him through eyes that were now slits of determination.

Reality set in. The guy could see a pattern developing. This skinny little kid was going to shatter all his pop bottles. If he made me work through all four prize levels of his little game, he might earn a lousy buck from me, but he’d lose more than that in bears and bottles. And if I decided to keep playing, he’d have a severely reduced inventory with which to swindle his next victims.

He got out his stick and unhooked my teddy bear—the huge brown one with the black nose. “Look, kid, just take this miserable bear and get outta my face!” he hissed.

I smiled as I walked away with my prize. The crowd was silent for a moment, then relished the drama that had just played out in front of them. Good had triumphed over evil. They broke out in wild cheers and applause.

What a strange and wonderful country, this United States of America. I came; I saw; I conquered.

BEST FRIENDS

As I strode back to the nearby church where my parents were attending an all-day reorientation-to-America mission meeting, I carried my massive prize on my shoulders piggyback style. I might as well have been a mighty hunter returning to feed an entire village.

My mom rolled her eyes and gave me a *Now what have you done?* look. As the meeting droned on, my mind wandered five thousand miles across the Atlantic to my little village of Nielle. The hot, dusty town was five hundred miles inland, about as far as anyone dared venture on the washboard-riddled path we called a road. Trucks were so rare that to have one grind through our cluster of mud huts was the highlight of the day. We children used to run alongside it in a jubilant troop, waving and cheering, until the truck rumbled on, leaving us engulfed in a billowing cloud of red dust that would settle over us and everything else for the next hour or so.

For most of the time my sister, Carol, and I had been the only white children within a day’s drive in any direction. Color didn’t much matter. We sang with great gusto, “Red and yellow, black and white—they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” Actually, for much of a typical day, we were all basically the same—very red with dust.

My mother had told us once that, as a young woman, she had begged, “Lord, please don’t call me to be a missionary. But if you do, please don’t let it be in Africa!” Well, this was not only Africa but the most remote, undesirable outpost one could imagine. A typical day for six months of the year was 110 degrees Fahrenheit and bone-dry. To step outside the house

felt like opening the oven door to see if the cookies were done. The waft of heat could stop you in your tracks like a fiery wall. Then came the rainy season, which meant a tropical downpour, turning the dust into a sea of sticky mud, every day for the next six months.

When we first arrived in Nielle, I was just six years old. There was no electricity or running water. The two-hole outhouse was at the end of a scary, snake-infested trek that required foot stomping to scare off all manner of scorpions and things that go bump in the night. In short, this place was a city girl's worst nightmare—but a little boy's paradise.

Here in this God-fearing missionary home, in the remote heart of Africa, among the poverty-stricken children whom I would later serve as an adult, my heart was shaped, filled, and tenderly nurtured. As I mentioned earlier, we truly thought Nielle was the center of the world. It wasn't that we were remote; it was that everything else on planet Earth was terribly far away. The dirt road brought trucks from afar; radio programs wafted in from exotic places; France, the home of our colonial masters, was (thankfully) on a whole different continent. None of the villagers had ventured far, even though the dirt road ambled north another twenty miles to the border of the Republic of Mali, across the wide, grassy savanna, and then dead-ended in the vast Sahara Desert.

Shifting restlessly in my chair at the New York church, I knew exactly what my friends were doing that day back at the center of the earth. It was the end of the rainy season, and the animals would be in abundance. I could see Padubeh, bent double, gracefully slipping through the ten-foot-tall elephant grass as he stalked a gazelle. He was the handsome one all the girls admired. He had a great sense of humor and was always joking.

Padubeh had jet-black skin, so black that it had a bluish hue. When he smiled, his dazzling white teeth were like a beacon in the night. He was a great hunter and always seemed to be in the right place at the right time; he could think like his prey. It was often Padubeh who strode confidently into the village in the evening, a rabbit tossed over his shoulder.

Kolzana would be nearby. He, like all the other boys, had three horizontal scars on each cheek, like cat whiskers, etched when he was very young to mark him as a male member of the Senufo tribe. They were scars

of honor, and Kolzana's were perfect on his handsome face. I wished I had them too. In my mind I was a Senufo.

In fact, I used to pray every night, "Lord, if you love me, let me wake up black like everyone else." I was tired of being teased by the others for scaring away the game when we hunted. "The monkey saw your white skin and took off!" they would scold. Morning after morning I'd check my arm first thing, only to be disappointed to be white for yet another day.

I remember one time in the cab of our pickup truck sitting between Kolzana's spread knees. We both had our elbows hanging out the passenger window. I looked at the color of his arm and then at mine, now darkened by the tropical sun. To my great joy, they were almost the same color. That night I thanked God for working in mysterious ways his wonders to perform. Now if I could just get Senufo scars!

While all of the village boys were my brothers, Alezye was more than that. He was my hero, my soul mate. I admired everything about him, wanted to be just like him, and would do anything for him. His brothers were Alezana and Alebeh. Their names, following the tradition of the Senufo culture, were drawn from their mother's name, Ale. The suffix "-zye" indicated the "firstborn son of Ale," while "-zana" pointed to the second born, "-beh" to the third born, and so on.

It was not unlike the biblical pattern of "Joshua the son of Nun" or "David the son of Jesse," only in our case the name was tagged to the mother instead of the father. This made a lot of sense in Nielle's polygamous culture. It was like having a better address; you knew precisely who your friends' mothers were, not just their fathers.

Alezye, with his muscular build, was always the strongest among us. He could carry a full bucket in each hand to water the young trees my father had planted for shade, while I waddled along like a duck straddling just one bucket, straining and putting it down with a slosh just as I thought my fingers were going to snap off.

I'm not sure how much older Alezye was than I, but it must have been five or six years. No one really knew. Precise birthdays went untracked in our village, much to the chagrin of the French officials who hounded us ceaselessly for details like that. No one had so much as a birth certificate. To

ask one of my friends how many years old he was would be as silly as asking you how many times you ate carrots last year. You would simply have to reply, “Well, quite a few, but I have no idea how many.” So it was with years of life among the Senufo people. They could only tell you they were born “before the big flood” or “after the great locust plague came through.”

If anybody from our village was going to be successful in life, here or anywhere else, we all knew it would be Alezye. He was one of the very first to accept the gospel message and “take the Jesus road,” as the Africans put it. He sat with my father day after day in the hot tin shed with Bible translations stacked all about, sweating profusely and helping Dad translate the Scripture into the Senari language. He was so smart. Before Dad learned the tonal complexities of the language, it was Alezye who ventured courageously with him to new villages to translate the stories and Dad’s messages of God’s love and salvation.

Being a tonal language, Senari was a minefield of faux pas. Mispronunciations could be funny or devastating. The word for “mother” and “cow” were virtually identical. So were the words for “father” (*naàwi*) and “scorpion” (*náwa*). Alezye no doubt kept our family out of more embarrassments than we ever knew.

He was always kind and generous. Together we built a tree house in one of the few trees big enough to support such a structure out there on the savanna plains. When we hunted, I followed him, placing my feet exactly where he had placed his as we stalked our prey across field and swamp. He taught me how to identify and track animals. He was an expert with the slingshot and taught me carefully to fire the weapon. How he would have laughed and patted me on the back after my carnival victory!

He was one with nature; he understood it, loved it, and respected it. He used his skills to protect the village from dangerous animals, to guard against the destructive ones, and to harvest those that could feed his family. He taught me to hide in the grass or a tree and call to various birds as they passed by. If a hornbill flew over, Alezye would match its call perfectly, and I’d watch the bird immediately make a sweeping circle and come land in the tree just over our heads. If a fruit dove flew by, the sound would be different, but the result would be the same.

It was Alezye who first figured out how to mix a concoction of lime juice and the white milk that oozes from a cut in the rubber tree, making an amazingly sticky, tenacious sort of glue we termed *la gum*. So long as you kept your fingers wet, it was as harmless as clay. But the minute anything dry touched it, it would stick fast, coming off only when it was again made wet.

We would lick our fingers and stalk the fields with *la gum*. We would study the bushes and trees to see which twigs and branches were favorite perches of certain birds. Licking our fingers again, we would spread the mixture on that twig, then hide and wait. Within minutes the unsuspecting master of the perch would return and alight. We would count to ten, then come charging out of our hiding places to capture bewildered creatures glued to their perches, flapping wildly and wondering what had happened to their flying ability. We would clean up their feet with our saliva. Little birds were studied, admired, and set free. Some birds just couldn't figure the whole thing out; we could catch them on the same branch day after day. Bigger birds weren't so fortunate; they wound up in the evening soup pot over the fire. We lived close to nature, giving to it and taking from it as naturally as breathing.

BABOONS, BEWARE

I knew that by now the corn and millet would be tall and ripening in the fields surrounding the village. At the beginning of the rainy season, the whole village had cultivated the fields with short-handled hoes called *dabas*. Men, women (with babies tied to their backs), and even children had taken their places in the long lines, rhythmically turning the soil. Resting spectators swayed or danced in the shade of the baobab trees as they set a musical pace with drums and balaphones (similar to xylophones, but with resonating gourds instead of metal pipes underneath). Older men sat and chanted encouragement to some for their outstanding efforts and lighthearted harassment to others whom they deemed to be slackers. In time the elephant grass was painstakingly beaten back, and a cultivated field emerged.

As the months passed, the fields were planted, weeded, watered, and

watched. Now the harvest was approaching, and the rewards for the hard work could almost be tasted. It was time to send in the boys and their trusty slings! Every plant was precious, and our very lives depended on bringing an adequate harvest into the little thatched-roof mud silos beside our huts. We loved this time of year, because it allowed us boys, even very little boys, to do something for our people that nobody could do better: protect the harvest from marauding troops of baboons and monkeys that could destroy an unguarded field in a single night. This was dangerous work, since a full-grown, fanged male baboon can weigh more than fifty pounds. In large troops, baboons fear almost nothing, certainly not a little boy—unless he is lethally armed and skilled!

We used two kinds of *lance-pierres*, a French term that simply means “stone-thrower.” One was the traditional slingshot, or catapult, made from the fork of a tree branch, to which we attached a half-inch strip of rubber cut from an inner tube. In the middle of the strip was a leather pouch where the rock would go.

Then there was the higher-caliber sling like the ones shown in Bible picture books. Made of rope woven together from sisal plants we kids had cut down and beaten on rocks to extract the pulp, it had a loop at one end to fit over the index finger and a leather pouch in the middle to hold rocks as big as a fist. The remaining strap was held lightly in the palm of the hand. After placing a smooth, round rock in the pouch, we would whiz the sling in a circle, building up velocity with several revolutions, and then turn loose the end of the rope at precisely the right moment to nail the target.

The bigger boys could get off a powerful shot with just one revolution if they were in a hurry, but for most of us, the longer the windup, the more power we could deliver. The release exploded with a crack as loud as a shot from a high-powered rifle.

We village boys never went anywhere without our lance-pierres hung around our necks. In the intense heat, we rarely wore much else, except maybe a pair of shorts as age and civilization imposed itself on us. My mother insisted that I wear sandals, although all my friends went barefoot. The soles of their feet were tougher than my shoes!

Grown men, when needing to dress up for an occasion, would wear

rubber sandals made from the tread of truck tires, with inner-tube straps. That seemed like such a waste to us kids. Inner tubes were best cut into strips and made into the business end of lance-pierres.

At the edge of the fields, we built surveillance platforms about five or six feet high so we could visually patrol the entire area. With razor-sharp machetes we chopped down brush, stripped off the leaves and bark to make poles for framing, tied them together with strips of the bark, and then spread elephant grass on top to make a relatively comfortable platform. At the crack of dawn or in the fading light of evening, you could hear the baboons swishing through the grass, heading for the ears of corn. As they crossed the cleared strip between grass and cornstalks, we had a split second to get off a shot with our slings.

Perched on our stilted posts, we stood watch until the corn was harvested. We often just sent warning shots at the rustling sounds in the elephant grass. If a big baboon still dared to trespass into our field, he was met with a hailstorm of rocks. If a whole troop of thirty or forty baboons invaded, we took no prisoners. Any baboon we hit and killed became instant lunch. We'd build a small fire at the base of our platform and roast it on sticks. Yum! Tradition dictated that the smallest child involved in the hunt got the most delicate part of the beast—the hands. In fact, it was a great honor; the little guy would sit there proudly chewing on a hand that looked just like his own except bigger and now roasted over the fire.

Nearly every evening we dragged “supper” home to the village. The men would pat our heads, their eyes filled with pride for their sons. The women would start the fires, and the feast would go way into the night. We felt so good that, even as children, we could make a real contribution.

If for some reason we didn't hit the invader squarely enough to kill him, the job was still basically done. We sent him off bruised and battered with a PhD in the consequences of stealing our corn. We were sorry to hurt him but hoped he would tell his friends about the fierce warriors on the stand in the field.

Sometimes when we thought we had killed the baboon, we would approach it cautiously only to have it jump up, teeth bared, and launch its own revenge. We learned to get a long stick and first reach out to touch its

eyeball. Even the nastiest baboon couldn't resist blinking if he was just playing possum.

As in everything we hunted, we always aimed as accurately as possible, then ran to the fallen beast to kneel at its side to speak to it before it died. We would apologize if we had caused it pain and promise that it would not go to waste. In reverent tones and often in tears, we promised to use it to feed our people.

And so the harvest was brought in each year. The older we got, the more accurate we became with our slings. Basically by age ten, if we could see something and our slings could go that far, we could hit it.

If you watch the evening news and see the Palestinian kids attacking the Israeli military with slings, you may think they are hopelessly mismatched. But look carefully: you never see the Israelis in open Jeeps, with windshields and mirrors to break. All you see are tanks and armored personnel carriers. That is for a good reason.

Now maybe you will understand why, when my mother told us boys in a Sunday school class under a mango tree about the Bible epic of David killing Goliath with a sling, we merely shrugged. Instead of getting the point of what an amazing thing God could do with just a little boy and a lot of faith, I remember thinking, *That was one stupid giant. I could have done that myself! Great big forehead, stationary giant just a few feet away—no problem!*

The bit about David choosing five smooth stones from the stream (1 Samuel 17:40) made perfect sense to my little band of marksmen. No, not because of the elaborate conjecture I've since heard from Bible expositors about Goliath having four fierce relatives to be killed, and so this was some great symbolism for the future. When you live and die by the sling as we did, you're always walking around with one eye on the ground looking for the next perfect stone. Round rocks are hard to come by and can make all the difference in the world. If one has a little bump on a side, the rock can veer off in flight. Flat rocks? Forget about it. You're not going to hit anything.

I'm pretty sure David picked up five smooth stones simply because there they were right in front of him. All us boys knew he should need only one to take care of Goliath, but why pass up the other four?

TWO ENDS OF THE BRIDGE

Fast-forward about forty-five years, and here I am again, all grown-up now. I've lost a bit of my slingshot accuracy, although I keep my original weapon close by in my third-floor office in Colorado Springs. There's just not as much stuff to shoot at now. I haven't seen a lizard or baboon around here in years. How sad!

I also hang on to my knowledge of poverty and its effect on little children. After all, I was there. I watched as preventable diseases stole my childhood friends in the village, one by one, and it broke my heart. I travel back and forth these days between two worlds. I jokingly tell people that my job is pretty tough. On one side of this international bridge, my role is to minister to the poor, to "comfort the afflicted." And then I cross the bridge, coming back to the Western, more affluent world, where my role is to speak and write to "afflict the comfortable." To do that with the same love can be a challenge.

Jesus did it very well, of course. He honored the poor woman who gave her last coins, the widow's mites. But he also cared about the rich young ruler who wanted to give but just couldn't; he was owned by his stuff. The Bible goes out of its way to highlight that "Jesus looked at him and *loved* him" (Mark 10:21). He knew, understood, and valued people at both ends of the economic spectrum.

I take seriously the verse that says, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48). I have been given much—not necessarily money, mind you, but experience and insight. I know deep in my soul that when it comes to children, we must stop thinking *someday* and start thinking of their worth and needs *today*. Our churches and missions have to go beyond their usual three-year corporate plans and start making thirty-year plans that include the discipleship of children and their role in the future. These plans must begin not someday but today.

Childhood in most non-Western societies, like the village where I grew

up, is a constant, gentle flow that moves from infant to toddler to child to youth and on to adulthood in a steady, integrated progression. In each phase of childhood, the child is allowed to be as much a part of the ebb and flow of daily life as his or her capabilities allow. The fun and games we experienced as children in Nielle were mostly a child's lighthearted spirit being applied to the duties and chores of daily life in the village. We didn't have rooms full of toys where we would go to play; we didn't have an hour or two where the schedule called for "play time." No, "play" just happened as we lived our lives in the village. We laughed and teased each other sitting in the shade of mango trees or around the cooking fire in the courtyard as we shelled peas or stirred the pot over the fire for supper. The little girls didn't play with Barbie dolls, pretending to care for them as if they were grownups. Instead, they actually took care of younger brothers and sisters who needed them—and had fun in the process.

The babies spent the rest of the day at their mother's feet or lovingly strapped to her back. They felt every laugh, heard every conversation, saw every tear drop, smelled every flower, and watched from a safe distance every pot of cooking rice. They swayed with the movement of their mothers as they worked in the fields, and in the evening they swayed again in perfect unison as Mom danced around the campfire.

The little ones were not excluded, either, from worship services in the mud hut with thatched roof that we called First Baptist Church of Nielle. Talk about a valid name; it was the first church of *any* kind for a day's drive in almost any direction. Church services were rarely the quiet, reflective, child-free sessions we seem to crave in the United States. They were punctuated with the natural sounds of everyday life as the generations mixed to sing, pray, laugh, cry, and worship—together as always.

Every morning the little boys scattered outside the village to gather firewood. The littlest toddler couldn't carry a big bundle of sticks, but he could at least pick up kindling while the older boys swung a machete to cut and split wood for the evening fire. We all enjoyed life as only a child can, while contributing to the needs of our families and village.

The same was true in fetching water, cooking, hunting, and harvesting

peanuts. The path to adulthood started in early childhood. As a child grew, he or she did more and more of what adults did. We were taught, challenged, praised, teased, and loved all in a gentle flow toward becoming an adult.

By the time my buddies were around fifteen years old, they knew almost everything they needed to know to be productive, contributing members of the Senufo tribe. (By the way, ask your grandparents or great-grandparents whether this was also true of America seventy years ago. How did we lose this precious aspect of growing up?)

I learned quickly after my first day at Coney Island that life for children in Western society was much different. Children were rarely viewed as useful and not often allowed to participate in the normal flow of life's duties and activities. I found teenagers my age who were frustrated, bored, and bitter at always being excluded, as if they had been placed on a shelf to wait out the adolescent years. They were just looking in on life, muttering to themselves, "I can do more than they think I can. I want meaning in my life. I can't wait to actually do something for somebody, to make a difference."

For littler children, it was the same or worse. In parents' great love for them, they lavished toys on their children that would allow them to "pretend" they were grownups. Sometimes adults would get down on the floor and play along as if they were baking cookies in the toy ovens but would then stand up and return to the "adult" world, feeling pretty good about themselves and their little excursion.

Without a doubt, it takes more time, effort, and perhaps patience to bring a child up to "our" world and actually make cookies in our kitchens. Oh yes, there will be more flour on the floor and more eggshells in the batter, but there will also be a treasure of giggles and compliments that build spirits and memories. My dad liked to tell my sister and me about coming home in the evening to a kitchen in full disarray, with a smiling but seriously disheveled wife plus two bubbly, delighted young children who proudly announced, "We helped Mommy make snickerdoodle cookies today!" Inviting a child to participate actively in the real life of our homes beats an hour of isolated make-believe in the most lavish toy room.

Allowing children into the mainstream of our lives lets them learn and

understand their worth, not someday, but today. The most precious thing we can give our children as parents is warm, positive memories. More important than making cookies, getting the shopping done, or cleaning the house is what happens along the way. Childhood happens!

Likewise, children are not tomorrow's church in waiting or in training. They are an important part of today's church. In today's selfish, "it's all about me" mentality, we may have passed the point of no return in our ability to welcome children back into our sanctuaries to worship with us. Or to let them actually lead us in worship.

The wife of my collaborator on this book, Grace Merrill, is an accomplished piano teacher. A few years ago she said to one promising student, "You're doing so very well on this hymn arrangement! Why don't you see if you could play it some Sunday at your church?"

The student's eyes dropped. "No, in my church," she quietly replied, "you have to be eighteen before you're allowed to do anything on the platform."

The real integration of children into our lives is happening all across the world—just not very much in Western society. Here we have forgotten that there really is no higher calling than to raise a child. We tend to do a lot *for* our children but not nearly enough *with* our children. In many of today's dual-income households, parents hire others to do most of the privilege of child raising.

Providing for our children is important, but it isn't nearly as crucial as many American couples seem to think. Enough *really* is enough. Trust me on this: there actually is a type of poverty on the far side of "enough"; wealth and possessions often bring a misery and emptiness all their own. Beyond "enough" can be lost opportunity to impact and enjoy our children.

When I came to work at Compassion International back in 1977 with a passion to help children in poverty, I solemnly promised my wife, Donna, and challenged myself that I would not do so at the expense of the well-being of any children God might entrust to us. Well, he did—Jenny and Katie. And I haven't! I work far more diligently at my role of papa than I do at being president of the corporation. My daughters are now twenty-two and eighteen years old, but not once have they been able to honestly

say, “Daddy, you cared about the other children of the world, but you forgot me.”

When all is said and done and I stand before my Lord, I am sure he will value more what I have done in faithfulness to my two children than the ministry to millions of children in poverty. I don’t know what you are doing in the workplace or what impact on the world you are making, but if you have children entrusted to you, I am dead certain the same is true of you. They are precious, deserving our time, attention, and serious commitment—not someday, but today.